

## *Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 14, 2022.

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God (Rom. 14:1–12).<sup>1</sup>

It used to be said that there are two things you should never discuss in polite company: religion and politics. I haven't heard it said in years, but I'm beginning to wonder if either isn't true, or we no longer have polite company to keep. But if it is true, why are these two topics often taboo for cordial conversation? Should we never talk about either? The potential problem is not inherent in the topics but from the strong opinions and personal convictions that stem from them. And sometimes, the stronger the opinion the more venomous the vitriol.

This is not to say that opinions are bad. On the contrary, as long as they are informed by the truth, they are good. But every opinion is not the same; they do vary in their degree of importance. For example, you may believe, as I do, that there is one God in three distinct Persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, "the same in substance, equal in power and glory."<sup>2</sup> This is my personal conviction that I share with the Christian church through the ages, and most importantly it is a conviction informed by the Word of God. It is an essential doctrine of the historic Christian faith. It's also my opinion that real wine should be offered for celebrating the Lord's Supper. I like it; maybe you do too, but it's not of primary (or even secondary) importance. It's an opinion I'm free to hold and even practice, but not a conviction worthy of dogma.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> "The Shorter Catechism" Q. 6, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 360-61.

## *Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing*

The problem occurs when we either reduce matters of primary importance to secondary status or elevate secondary matters to primary. I would imagine we have all encountered people who consider all of *their* personal convictions to be of primary importance, non-negotiable, and worth fighting for. I've known people who lack the discernment to distinguish between primary and secondary or tertiary matters, and in most cases everything for them is primary. There's never been a hill too small on which to die for these undiscerning gladiators.

This, of course, is nothing new. What we are susceptible to today, so they were in first-century Rome. Yes, the topics were different, but the problem was the same, as is the solution. We must keep the main thing the main thing. As Christians, we must remember that in non-essentials, we enjoy liberty; in essentials, unity; and in all things, charity.

### **In Non-essentials: Liberty**

It is helpful to remember that the church in Rome likely came out of Paul's two-year imprisonment in Rome, which began with the Jewish community and continued with new Gentile converts. The Roman church was an eclectic mix of Christians with diverse backgrounds learning to worship and live together in Christian community. But with varying backgrounds comes baggage, notably for those who had lived for years, even decades, as devout Jews. Imagine following the rigid Judaic dietary laws all of your life and then finding yourself at the dinner table with a pig eater. But if you'd enjoyed unkosher delicacies all your life, such rigid repulsion would seem incongruent with the liberty of the gospel. Or, what if you had recently been rescued from pagan idolatry by the liberating power of the gospel, only then to be offered meat that was offered to idols. Wouldn't you have some reservations, even though you are free to eat as you please?

Christians are, after all, free to eat all kinds of foods. As Jesus taught his disciples (Mark 7:19) and God declared to Peter (Acts 10:15), the Ceremonial Law and its dietary restrictions ceased under the New Covenant. In this sense, everything is "kosher" to a Christian. But the liberty we enjoy as Christians includes not only the freedom to partake but the freedom to abstain. Some fry shrimp, others shallots; some roast pork, others potatoes.

The second example, also likely influenced by the Jewish Christians in the church, is regarding holy days: "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike." Again, imagine if for most of your life you had celebrated Israel's holy days and festivals. It would be hard not to still consider those days sacred. In our context, imagine if someone, like some of our Puritan forefathers, said you could not celebrate Christmas anymore. You would mourn and probably revolt, fighting to keep Christmas. But what if you can keep it, and eat as you please, enjoying the liberty the gospel grants?

So, who says we can't? Often we do. When we demand that our opinions over non-essentials be shared and personal convictions followed by our brothers and sisters, we forget the grace of the gospel. We may want our weaker brother liberated from what we consider legalism, rather respecting his convictions. Conversely, we may hold our personal convictions with a sense of self-righteous religiosity, labeling liberty as licentiousness. Differing opinions and personal

## *Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing*

convictions over non-essentials can easily lead to strife in the church, drawing lines and choosing sides where none should exist.

Paul says, rather than quarrel over opinions, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind,” which is the equivalent of saying, listen to your conscience. Why? Because in non-essential matters, the point is not food or festivals but the heart. Ultimately, all who are in Christ are servants of the Lord, and it is before him that we stand or fall. So, in non-essentials we enjoy (and extend) liberty.

### **In essentials: Unity**

Now, to some this may sound like ecclesiastical anarchy, but in reality it is mutual submission in love for Christ’s sake. It’s also a testimony of the gospel we believe. Paul reminds us that “none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself,” meaning we are not our own; we were bought with a price. The purchase price was paid, so to speak, in Christ’s substitutionary death. We were redeemed, guaranteed in his resurrection. Therefore, running the gamut of our existence, from life to death, “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

As a result, as Paul explains in 2 Corinthians, “[Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15). And this gospel truth is an important distinction for unity in the church: Living in community with one another is not first and foremost about you or me. All that we do, we do for our Redeemer.

All for Jesus! All for Jesus!  
All my being’s ransomed pow’rs,  
all my thoughts and words and doings,  
all my days and all my hours.<sup>3</sup>

This means that what we do we do not for our own self-interest but for the benefit of the body of Christ, which includes submitting to one in matters of personal liberty.

But it also includes coming together, unified in our agreement of the essential tenets of the Christian faith. And while I could provide a prosaic list of our essential beliefs, for the sake of brevity (and beauty) consider what we profess in the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,  
begotten of his Father before all worlds  
God of God, Light of Light,  
very God of very God,  
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;  
by whom all things were made; who for us and for our salvation

---

<sup>3</sup> “All for Jesus,” *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 565.

## *Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing*

came down from heaven,  
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary,  
and was made man;  
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered and was buried;  
and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,  
and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father;  
and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead;  
whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son;  
who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified;  
who spoke by the prophets;  
and we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church;  
we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;  
and we look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

The creed is not an exhaustive treatise but is a summary of the essential beliefs, the non-negotiables upon which we are united.

So, there are non-essential matters on which we agree to disagree, and there are essential matters which we believe and must never disagree. There are things worth fighting for, and for these we unite. For example, it was over disagreements on the fundamentals of the Christian faith that led the faithful to leave the mainline church and form the Presbyterian Church in America in 1973. Despite arguments to the contrary, embracing heresy is not unity, which is why we are so careful to articulate our doctrine and adhere to our standards, not for the sake of fighting but for the peace and purity of the church. And standing firm on the bedrock of the Word of God, we unite.

### **In All Things: Charity**

But in non-essential matters, for most if not all of us, we can let our opinions cloud our clarity, even considering our opinions superior to the contrary. Elevated to the level of personal conviction, it can lead us to become adversarial, despising or judging others, even our brother or sister. Unchecked, we can become uncharitable to others, especially with those who do not share our opinions. I am reminded of the counsel of one of my seminary professors who said that strife in the church typically happens not over significant matters of doctrine but over insignificant matters of preference and sharp disagreement over the trivial. He was right, and I've seen it firsthand, abounding in legalism or licentiousness but not love.

Here is the truth that we all need to hear, the reality that should open our eyes: We are all living the life that God has given, with all of its hardships and pleasures, all of its tragedies and joys. No one is exempt from living. No one is exempt from dying. And no one is exempt from standing before the judgment seat of God.

---

<sup>4</sup> "The Nicene Creed," Ibid., 846.

*Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing*

And on that day, it will not be you or me seated on the judgment seat. It will be the one who humbled himself in humanity and death (Phil. 2:6-8). It will be the one whom death could not hold (Acts 2:24). It will be the one who rose again in glory and under whom God put everything in subjection (Heb. 2:8). Neither you nor me, but he is the one whom “God has highly exalted ... and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

It will be before the Lord Jesus Christ that each of us will give an account. And in that moment our highly exalted opinions will dissipate like vapors of insignificance. You will not despise your brother’s eating or drinking habits. You will not debate his worship calendar. You will not defend your preferences as superior over his. In fact, you will not find fault with your brother but will look to your Savior. And when your mouth opens to give an account, you will speak only of what the Lord has done for and through you, directing all honor and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, brothers and sisters, let us not despise or pass judgment on one another but love and live with one another in the Lord. Let us “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thess. 5:11). Let us “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24), praying,

Oh let my love with fervor burn,  
And from the world now let me turn;  
Living for Thee, and Thee alone,  
Bringing Thee pleasure on Thy throne;

Only one life, ‘twill soon be past,  
Only what’s done for Christ will last.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> C.T. Studd, “Only One Life,” source unknown.